

Forcible Entry Size-up & Tools

By Mike Lombardo

In another issue of Fire Nuggets, we talked about the basic procedures or rules of forcible entry that will offer the most success in accomplishing our mission. These “rules” will also keep us out of trouble. Here we will look at size-up and tool selection for forcible entry.

Size-up of the door and occupancy will help us select tools and give us an idea of what we will encounter inside the door. The direction a door swings and hinge locations are some of our size-up factors. The vast majority of residential buildings will have inward-swinging doors. This will also mean the hinges are on the inside of the door. An outward-swinging door in an occupancy of this type usually indicates a closet or basement entrance. An inward-opening door will generally signal a bedroom or bathroom. The threshold in a bathroom doorway is also a good size-up factor and can be a great guide during a search. In multiple dwellings, an outward-swinging door can be a danger sign. Utility closets will have outward-swinging doors that may contain haz-mats with which to contend. In public-housing-project buildings, we may find an elevator door that swings out. If this door has an inoperable interlock device, it may open to a shaft without an elevator at that floor. When dealing with outward-opening doors it must be remembered that the hinges will not always be visible, they may be recessed into the door.

The construction of the door, the frame, and wall, are also important to us. The type of door construction — steel, wood, solid core, or hallow core — will determine how we will place our prying tool. Some of our best indicators when looking at a door are the lock faces and keyways. If we find a door with a faceplate and no keyway, for instance, we may want to consider an alternative entry point. It probably is not the primary door the occupants use and may be a very difficult door to force. When looking at a door, determine if there are bolt heads coming through that could indicate a drop bar is behind it. These bars may be simple 2 x 4's dropped into an angle iron frame or elaborate mechanical bars that recess into a wall at the doorframe. Are there any keyways that are not at the edge of the door? If you find a keyway in the center or off-center you may be dealing with a lock that has a buttress to the floor. This could also indicate a lock with rods encased into the door that slide into the frame and wall in two or four directions. The doorframe construction will often determine what tools we use. For instance, a weak stop will prevent using hydraulic tools, such as the Rabbit Tool, a lightweight, hand-carried spreading device, because the stop will fail before the lock does. Or with a very strong door and frame set in a drywall partition wall, it will be easier to breach the wall rather than forcing the door.

The type of occupancy is also important. Doors at “Sandy’s Muffins and Buns” will probably not be as tough a problem as a door on “Christa’s Rare Jewels and Gold.” Occupancy can also be a factor when determining how much of a forcible entry problem we face. A fire in a large multiple dwelling, or worse, in a single room occupancy^[1], can

cause a lot of stress for an IC when he has one truck at a fire on a lower floor of one of these. One idea is to send a team with a hydraulic tool (rabbit) to the floor above and force every door possible. This will allow other teams to move in and search without being spent from forcing each door.

There are three basic types of forcible entry operations: *conventional*, *through-the-lock*, and *special operations* (cutting, breaching, etc). Conventional forcible entry involves two methods: *mechanical*, which involves the use of hydraulic tools, and *manual*. Through-the-lock forcible entry involves removing part of a lock, then using a “key” tool to duplicate the action of the key. Special operations will involve using cutting tools and other equipment to force gates, roll-up doors and other types of high-security devices that would not be easily forced using conventional methods. Some boarded-up applications on vacant buildings may require special tools or operations.

The first operation we will talk about is *manual forcible entry*. The tools of choice are a Halligan tool and a striking tool, such as a flat-head axe, sledge, or splitting maul. The type of Halligan tool is important. Pinned or cast tools can fail. Forged tools are better. A tool with a bevel in the fork and slight bevel in the adz is preferred because it imparts more leverage than a straight fork or adz. The fork must be narrow enough to allow it to be forced between the door and jam. Many Halligans on the market today are manufactured with a fork that is entirely too large, preventing it from getting into the jam. A pike axe is not a very good choice for forcible entry because it makes a poor striking tool. The consequence is that we end up chopping at a door, creating what I like to call “fireman frustration marks.” A flat-head ax or maul is a much better choice. Heavier, rather than lighter, will help too. Eight-pound axes and ten- or twelve-pound mauls do a great job.

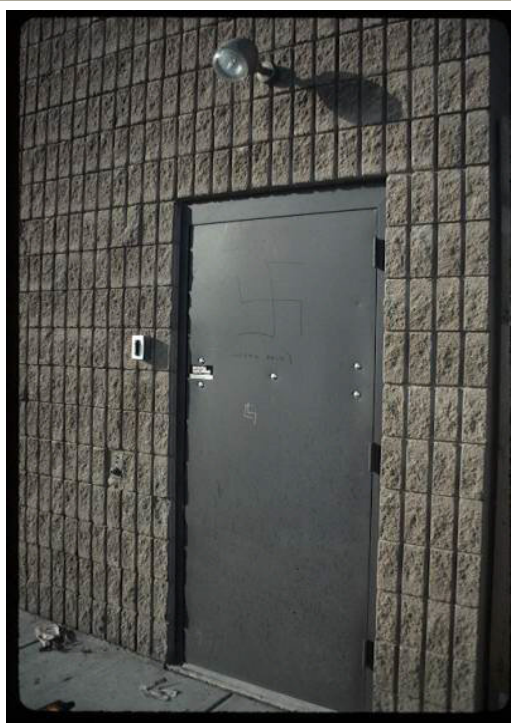
We have talked about a hydraulic tool (Rabbit) already. Other useful items are a rotary saw with a metal-cutting blade, a torch, battering ram (the kind the SWAT teams have are super), a K-tool, and some personal tools. I have carried, for quite some time, a pair of water-pump pliers. I have ground the ends down, and one end is heated and bent to create a short L. This gives me the two key tools that are found in the K-tool kit. Many lock cylinders, such as a pivoting deadbolt, can be pulled off with these pliers, allowing manipulation of the lock with the “keys.” We must keep a good reversible screwdriver in our personal tool inventory. A shove knife is very handy also. With floor locks, such as “The Club for a Home,” a shove knife will let us know if there is a lock at the floor level by sliding the knife in and hitting the lock or barrier.

This is a look at size-up and tools for some common forcible-entry problems you may encounter. There are many other tools on the market today, their application limited only by your imagination. Burglars keep the lock industry on their toes, but, unfortunately, we often find ourselves one or two steps behind the lock industry. It is imperative we continue to pursue new techniques while at the same remembering the basics.



Left: *Size-up should consider door, frame, and wall construction as well as locks present and door swing direction. This photo is an obvious reason why we should determine conditions behind a door before we try it.*

Below left: *Bolt heads can signal a very difficult door!* **Below right:** *The inside of the door shows bars that slide more than two inches into the frame and wall.*



Right: *Not all Halligans are the same. Notice the difference in forks of the three tools. The tool at the top is the far superior tool.*



Above: *When we don't have the correct tools we can end up with "fireman frustration marks" on the door.*



Above: *Handy tools for forcible entry situations. From left to right, screwdriver, water-pump pliers (Channel Lock) with ends ground and bent to create "key" tools, Vise Grips for securing padlocks during cutting operations and pulling slats on roll-up doors, and webbing to control doors while they are being forced. These are just a few of the many uses.*

[1] A single-room occupancy is a building that contains many individual rooms. They often result from multiple dwelling conversions. An example would be a set of flats that formerly housed two families converted to house 30 tenants.